DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 390 594 RC 020 378

AUTHOR Sher, Jonathan
TITLE Creating a Conspiracy in Favour of Rural Communities. Conference Keynote Address.
PUB DATE Jul 94
NOTE 6p.; In: Issues Affecting Rural Communities. Proceedings of an International Conference Held by the Rural Education Research and Development Centre (Townsville, Queensland, Australia, July 10-15, 1994); see RC 020 376.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Agents; *Cooperative Planning; Economic Development; Foreign Countries; Government Role; *Misconceptions; *Professional Personnel; Public Policy; *Rural Areas; *Rural Development; *Social Responsibility
IDENTIFIERS *Australia; Empowerment

ABSTRACT

This keynote address suggests that the rural sector of Australia is, and will remain, absolutely essential to the well-being of the entire nation. There are misconceptions that the rural economy is no longer important to the nation as a whole and that rural people and communities are marginal to society. Australia's entire economy is heavily dependent upon foreign earnings, and rural Australia is the primary source from which these economic blessings flow. While only 15 percent of Australia's people live in rural areas, approximately 67 percent of Australia's foreign earnings are attributable to rural places, people, and resources. And yet, this disproportionately large, rural contribution to the nation's wealth and well-being appears to go largely unnoticed by the average politician. Adding injury to insult, rural people and communities are the last and least to benefit from rural development. Rural-oriented professionals should commit themselves to promote empowerment and well-being of rural people, both as individuals and as communities. Rural decline and exploitation are matters resting in personal choices and in collective choices as societies. A fundamental stage of rural development is the creation of alliances within and across rural communities, between rural communities and governments, between the public and private sectors, and across the urban-rural divide. Particularly important are alliances among rural professionals and between rural professionals and rural people. This conference can serve as a starting point for building such alliances. (LP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 390 594

CONFERENCE KEYNOTE ADDRESS

CREATING A CONSPIRACY IN FAVOUR OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

Dr Jonathan Sher - USA

U S DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

D McSwan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

RC020378

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CONFERENCE KEYNOTE ADDRESS

CREATING A CONSPIRACY IN FAVOUR OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

Dr Jonathan Sher — USA

I woke up this morning in my lovely hotel room and gazed out my window at the fabulous panorama of this corner of paradise. And, as I basked in the beauty of such an idyllic setting, and as I started looking forward to the fascinating conversations and presentations ahead of us this week, I just shook my head in wonder and said to myself: "My goodness, the rural crisis sure has been good for me"!

Because of rural problems, I've had the opportunity to travel to wonderful countryside communities all around the OECD nations. Because of rural issues, I've had the privilege of earning a good income to support my own family. Because of the rural agenda, I've garnered professional honours, such as the invitation to be your conference keynote speaker. Because of the rural sector, I even had the chance to learn to live with the irony of being a rural expert based in Paris. Moreover, the benefits on being involved with rural development haven't only been professional. In fact, I met my wife when I was sent by the Commonwealth Government to evaluate a rural education program Katrina was running based in Leigh Creek, South Australia. Beyond any shadow of a doubt, my involvement with rural people and places has been a blessing to me, and a well-spring of opportunities for me.

I suspect a fair number of you, too, have benefited profoundly from rural work, from rural life and, in a certain sense, from rural problems. The fact that we, as rural-oriented professionals and academics, have benefited from our involvement with rural communities hardly makes us an aberration. On the contrary, we are merely a tiny sample of the spectacular spectrum of beneficiaries across our societies who are deeply indebted to rural people, rural places and rural resources for their own well-being.

In the report Katrina and I wrote, entitled "Beyond the Conventional Wisdom: Rural Development as if Australia's Rural People and Rural Communities Really Mattered" [which was made available to each of you in your Conference packets], we pointed out that the rural sector of Australia (and of most other OECD nations) has been the goose that lays the golden eggs, the mother lode, the cash cow and the eternal fountain of wealth flowing out across the whole society. The rural sector continues to be, and will remain, absolutely central to the well being of the entire nation. The idea that the rural economy is no longer important to the nation as a whole — like the idea that rural people and communities are marginal to society — is just plain wrong. From being the provider of food self-sufficiency for the nation (a fact long taken for granted by urban dwellers) to being the source of Australia's international identity (and, thereby, the big draw in terms of the nation's 7.5 billion dollar foreign earnings from tourism), to being the place of recreation and renewal for city people, the rural sector is now, and will remain (even in this ostensibly "post-industrial age") the firm foundation undergirding the nation's living standard.

Australia's entire economy is heavily dependent upon foreign earnings. Without the revenues gained from exports, the Australian economy would be "down the gurgler" in short order and Australians (urban and rural) would quickly cease to be able to afford the very nice living standards to which they have become accustomed.

In light of this reality, it is worth reminding people that rural Australia is the primary source from which these economic blessings flow. While only 15% of Australia's people live in rural areas, approximately two-thirds (67%) of Australia's foreign earnings are attributable to rural places, rural people and rural resources. And yet, to the average politician (let alone to the average urbanite) this absolutely crucial, and disproportionately large, rural contribution to the nation's wealth and well-being appears to be largely unnoticed — and certainly, unapplauded. These same facts are true, to a greater or lesser extent, across the OECD countries.

If you were a visitor from another planet, you would think the rural people and the rural communities who generated all this wealth for their nation should, and would, be wealthy themselves. If you were a visitor from another planet, you could be excused for presuming that rural people and communities should, and would, be accorded enormous respect and gratitude from the rest of the society for the vastly disproportionate contributions they unceasingly make to everyone's well-being. And, if you were that visitor from another planet , you doubtless would expect that the rest of society should, and would, cheerfully and fulsomely nurture rural people and rural communities so they would be in a position to keep all those rural blessings flowing.

Unfortunately, as people from this time and place, we know only too keenly that none of these "should and would" statements actually reflect reality. Whether out of societal ignorance, arrogance, or willful amnesia — we know rural people and communities are neither cherished nor accorded the support they so richly deserve. Instead, rural people tend to be simply forgotten, or actively denigrated (indeed there is a whole lexicon of derogatory terms for country folk), or merely dismissed with nostalgic sentimentality as anachronisms in our modern world — irrelevant, albeit warmly remembered. Such disrespect and ingratitude are nothing short of shameful.

Adding injury to insult, we know that "ordinary" rural people and communities are the ones benefiting last and least from most so-called rural development. Rural development may be carried out in their name, but only rarely is it controlled by ordinary rural people — and thus, only rarely do ordinary rural citizens reap the lion's share of the rewards from the "development" taking place around them.

One good example of this phenomenon can be found in the area of employment. Jobs — especially good jobs — are a priority concern almost everywhere. Rural resources get translated into an enormous number of jobs. However, the disheartening reality is that most of these rural-generated jobs do not, in fact, go to rural people. The employment benefits of rural resource development are transported "downstream", outside the community and often even outside the nation. There is a vast army of people outside rural Australia who owe their livelihoods, their jobs and their incomes to Australia's rural sector. This long list includes truckers and dock workers who distribute rural commodities, employees of urban manufacturing and processing industries who add value to rural "inputs", capital city-based public servants and academics who study, regulate and "assist" rural people and industries, and myriad private sector employees in the travel, insurance, finance and other industries reliant upon rural contributions.

There is nothing inherently wrong with lots of people in lots of places sharing in the bountiful rural harvest. You and I are among these beneficiaries. Nevertheless, there is plenty wrong when the beneficiaries refuse to acknowledge, honour, or do their fair share to return the favour to their rural benefactors. Similarly, there is plenty wrong when the very same rural people and communities responsible for the bountiful harvest in which we all share are left without effective access to necessary services, are having already minimal amenities and infrastructure withdrawn, and are denied appropriate investment in their future. And finally, there is plenty wrong when the assistance that is provided to the rural sector is offered grudgingly, paternalistically and with a sense of being charitable to those living "in the bush".

For society, as a whole, and governments, in particular, to do all they can to support rural self-determination and to promote rural well-being does not constitute an act of charity, kindness or magnanimity. Rather, investing in the rural sector is nothing more (or less) than an act of common sense, of well-earned respect, of enlightened self-interest, and of simple justice. Rural people and rural communities — for the disproportionately high contributions

RC 020378

they long have made, are still making, and will continue to make to the nation's well-being — deserve nothing less than our very best efforts to help them help themselves create a brilliant future.

This chasm between the high level of beneficial rural contributions to our societies and the low level of appropriate societal contributions to the rural sector — in other words, the great extent to which rural people, communities and resources are shortchanged, misunderstood and maltreated by the larger society — constitutes the context of this conference. The question I want to ask — and the challenge I want to present — is "What are we going to do about it?". What are we going to do through this conference that will help end the marginalization of, and dispel the pernicious stereotypes about, rural people and rural communities? What are we going to do as a result of this conference to help rural people and communities not only survive but thrive in the years ahead? What are we going to do?

I am emphasizing the words we and do because, in the final analysis, our actions are the main (if not the only) outcomes of this entire conference. If we merely use, this gathering to catch up with old friends and to make new ones while basking in an idyllic setting, then the conference will not have been worth convening. If we choose to use our time together merely to garner a few extra bits of technical knowledge, and to learn a few new tricks of our trade, to take home with us, then we will have squandered the marvellous opportunity the conference organisers have offered us.

As your keynote speaker, I want to stress the need to take a good hard look at ourselves and at what we should, and will, do once we leave this lovely venue. Like most of you, I have been to many rural conferences over the years. Perhaps you, like me, have observed the curious phenomenon that most such conferences have relentlessly focussed on what "they" — that is, someone (anyone!) other than us — are doing wrong and what "they" should do differently and better. Who "they" are changes from conference to conference. Sometimes, "they" are the transnational corporations and other powerful economic entities we view as having wreaked havoc (social, environmental and economic) on the rural communities and situations with which we are most familiar. Often, "they" are the politicians and senior policymakers we have identified as the ones responsible for misguided policies, inadequate funding levels and a lack of appropriate regard for the well-being of rural people and places.

Most often, however, "they" are rural people themselves. Our tendency is focus on some sub-group of the rural "they" — whether it's community leaders, indigenous populations, women, youth, farmers, and so on. We talk about their characteristics, survey their attitudes, analyze their behaviour, critique their choices and give advice about what they should do next. "They" may be the people and places about which we care deeply and toward which we have made profound commitments of our time, talent, and energy. But "they" are not "us".

Whether "they" are economic elites, political leaders or ordinary rural folks, my point is that at most conferences we spend far more effort on what "they" should do in light of our deliberations and far less effort honestly confronting what we should do as a result of our time together. "They" remain separate and distinct from "us" — from the kinds of people present at this important gathering. Lest you think I am exaggerating this point unduly, please assist me in conducting a brief exercise I hope will help us better understand just who we are and what we represent.

Please stand up if you consider yourself (or would be considered by others) to be a member of the professional/academic/bureaucratic class. [Note: Virtually everyone in the group stands up]. Now, please remain standing, if you believe (or if others believe) that, in your professional life, you have a discernible impact and a more than trivial influence on rural people and places. [Note: Very few people sit down]. Please remain standing if you were raised in a rural area (or if you have long-term, first-hand knowledge of rural life. [Note: About 25% of the people sit down]. And finally, please remain standing if you now live and work in the very same rural community in which you were raised. [Note: Only a handful of people remain standing].

Thank you for helping me so graphically make the point that this is not a rural conference in the sense that it is a gathering of farmers, fishers, miners and foresters, nor a convention of rural shop keepers, self-employed people related to the tourism industry, the employees of small businesses in small towns, and the rural unemployed. While this is a conference bringing together a fascinating variety of people who work in a variety of fields in a variety of places both across Australia and overseas, there is a common thread and a common bond among us. "We" in this case are a sampling of the myriad professionals/academics/bureaucrats who have an interest in and/or responsibilities for rural issues, people and places.

The fact we are a group of rural-oriented professionals is nothing to be ashamed of nor apologetic about. Too often, the story of rural development — or, conversely, of the rural crisis — is told as if we professionals had no significant role at all. As I will spell out in more detail a bit later, we professionals deserve a substantial amount of both the credit and the blame for what has happened to, and within, rural communities over the past few decades. We rural professionals can be characterized in many ways, but the one role wholly unavailable to us is that of the "innocent by-stander". There are no innocent by-standers in our ranks. For better and worse, rural-oriented professionals have been, and continue to be, an integral part of the overall history of rural development and rural life.

While our impact has been ubiquitous across the rural scene, and while we are integral to the story, our contributions (good and bad) have been distinctive ones that flow from our status and behaviour as professionals. It's worth remembering that, as professionals, we have been socialized in ways and immersed in a professional "culture" that remain separate and distinct from the socialization processes and cultural norms characteristic of "ordinary" rural citizens and communities.

Thus, to be an urban-raised professional doing rural work is to be engaged in cross-cultural activities. And, even rural-raised professionals properly are described as being (at best) bi-cultural. In my view, both the reality of, and the continuing potential for, cultural clashes between rural professionals and "ordinary" rural people have been overlooked and, thus, left largely unreconciled. How best to negotiate these cultural differences strikes me as a topic worth addressing at this meeting.

As a class and as a culture, we professionals accord very high priority to three things: specialized knowledge, portable competence and career advancement through geographic mobility. These are what we value and these are what we reward. By contrast, rural people tend to value generalist knowledge, local-specific competence, and geographic stability. Obviously, these are gross generalizations, but they are a useful beginning for the process of identifying different cultural norms and values.

In essence, professionals are rewarded for "doing the thing right" whatever that thing might be — from teaching the history curriculum, to performing a medical procedure, to attracting an industry to relocate to a given rural area. However, it is my observation that we professionals are so concerned with how to "do the thing right" that we too often, and too easily, skate over the issue of what it really means to "do the right thing". In other words, we tend to pay far too little attention to the ethical dimensions of our own work as professionals. We are only too happy to allow narrow role definitions and hierarchical structures to take the onus off of us to really think through the ethical integrity of the professionals tasks assigned to us. Is the history curriculum we teach really helping rural students understand their past and grasp the right lessons for their future? "That's a question for somebody else", we are likely to say. But, I would argue we have a serious ethical responsibility to ensure we not only do the thing right, but also do the right thing.

What does it mean to do the right thing as rural-oriented professionals? As a first principle, "doing the right thing" must have as its foundation a deep and abiding respect for the integrity of rural people and rural communities. In other words, our starting point should be a commitment — born of this respect — to serve as an effective force promoting the empowerment and well-being

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

of rural people, both as individuals and as communities. Respect for who they are and what they want should be the key characteristic of our own work.

In our efforts to both do the right thing and do the thing right, there are three positive facts that should encourage us, empower us, and energise us. The first fact is that neither rural decline nor rural exploitation are inevitable. I am not a theologian, but I know the Bible well enough to know there is no reason to believe that rural decline and rural exploitation are God's plan or desire for our world. I am not a scientist, but I know enough about science to know there is no immutable law of nature that dictates rural decline or rural exploitation. I am not an economist, but I know enough about economics to know there is no economic force that preordains either rural decline or rural exploitation. Thus, the rural crisis is not a matter of destiny, but rather the consequence of a series of choices that people have made.

The good news and the bad news is that rural decline and rural exploitation are matters resting in our hands and in our collective choices as societies. Because rural problems are the results of choices people have made, people also have the choice of solving these problems.

That is very good news, indeed, because if there weren't meaningful choices people could make about the future of rural communities, rural economies and rural life, then there wouldn't be a heck of a lot worth discussing over the next few days. Where there is choice, there is hope.

The second positive fact of life in our favour is that we have more than hope with which to work — we also have extraordinary power. This might strike many of you as nonsense, or wishful thinking, or a great exaggeration — largely because you (like me, I might add) often are only too aware of your own limitations and sometimes feel a discouraging sense of powerlessness. Normally, we think of power as something residing in economic elites or in a few political leaders.

And yet, a colleague of mine, John McKnight, helped me understand that, collectively, we, as members of the professional/academic/bureaucratic class hold an astonishing amount of power in our hands. The first domain of our collective power is that we are the ones who get to define society's problems. Think about it. In our society, who defines what is wrong, and who decides which competing concerns are given priority? It's certainly not "ordinary" people (rural or urban) who make such determinations for our society. In truth, the answer is that, collectively, we define and we decide such matters. We call this process "needs assessment" and we have assumed the power to be in charge of this process — on society's behalf, of course.

Next comes figuring out what resources must be marshalled to address the opportunities, and to redress the problems, identified through our needs assessment activities — and then, making choices about how best to employ and deploy these resources. We call this crucial process "planning" and, amazingly, we, as a class, get to do this, too. It certainly is not a realm in which "ordinary" people's ideas, actions and desires dominate.

Needless to say, some group has to be in charge of actually carrying out the plans and programs we designed to meet the needs we identified. We call it "*implementation*", and, guess what, we get to do this, too! Finally, just to complete the circle — and to reveal the full extent of our collective power as professionals — it turns out that we get to control the process of deciding whether what we did, based on what we planned in accordance with our assessment of needs and opportunities actually succeeded. We call this process "*evaluation*" and, yes indeed, it is a process that we, as a class, fully control. So, the second positive fact to keep in mind as we engage in the work of this conference is that we have an extraordinary amount and range of power at our disposal — especially if we do choose to work collaboratively and cooperatively.

The inevitable question that arises is: "On whose behalf and to whose ultimate benefit are we exercising our power?". I hope this question is one you ask each other, and ask yourselves, over and over again during this conference. Are we going to allow ourselves to behave as mere tools of the existing political and economic elites — (another group with extraordinary power that is manifest largely through controlling us!) who are the chief beneficiaries of the *status quo*? Are we going to take a narrow, selfish view and use our power primarily to ensure our own well-being? Or, are we going to use our power to advance the best interests of the "ordinary" rural people, places and communities we touch during the course of our professional lives?

While these need not always be mutually exclusive uses of our power — I am, in fact, an advocate of "doing well by doing good" — there are times and circumstances when we do have to choose sides and to take stands that will favour one group over another. At that crucial moment of reckoning, whose side will we be on? With whom will we cast our lot? My hope is that at such times we will have the courage and the respect to first and foremost advance the best interests of the "ordinary" rural people whom we have agreed to serve. Our professional involvement with the rural sector sure has been good for all of us. In return, we need to do all in our considerable power to ensure that rural communities also have every chance to realize their enormous positive potential. They deserve nothing less from us — not as an act of charity on our part, but rather as a matter of our ethical obligation to do justice.

The third, and final, positive fact I want to share with you this morning is that we have a variety of potential allies as we carry out our professional endeavours — allies who can ease our burdens, help us choose more wisely, and enable us to act more effectively than we can do in isolation. In our report " Beyond the Conventional Wisdom", Katrina and I spell out who these allies are and how best to build these essential alliances. Briefly, we advocated the creation and activation of five alliances: within rural communities; across rural communities; between rural communities and governments; between the public and private sectors; and, across the urban-rural divide.

If we were writing this report today, we would add two key alliances to this list. The first is the *interdisciplinary* alliance among rural professionals across the "turf" lines that have kept us divided for far too long (a task this conference could go a long toward accomplishing). The second is the alliance between "ordinary" rural citizens and the rural professionals who are supposed to serve them. There needs to be an alliance through which we begin to see ourselves as being in *partnership* with rural people, instead of merely perpetuating the traditional power relationship with us as the dominant service providers and them as the passive clients. These two additions to the five alliances outlined in our report would equip all of us with seven new paths toward genuine rural renewal and development.

It must be understood, however, that working hard to build these seven alliances is not just a precondition for the *real* rural development that will follow. Nor is taking this step just a necessary act of political constituency-building *en route* to the main rural development agenda . Rather, it is most accurate to view this organising effort — this creation of key alliances — as a fundamental stage of rural development itself.

Allow me to take this point a bit further. The task of building these alliances — a task which could and should begin right here and right now with this conference — is an act of conspiracy. And, I am convinced that rural Australia (like rural communities nearly everywhere) desperately need a conspiracy in their favour. Although usually thought of as something negative, "to conspire" merely means to plot together toward a common goal: literally, according to the dictionary, "to breathe together as one."

Such unity of purpose and cooperative action across traditional boundary lines have been conspicuous by their absence in rural Australia, rural America and throughout the rural sector of the OECD nations. The uncomfortable truth for rural professionals and rural citizens alike is that "going it alone" and rugged independence will no longer succeed as strategies for either individual advancement or collective development.

Virtually all of us are in the same boat together — and it is still not possible to sink only part of any boat! Our fates are more closely and more powerfully linked than we often recognize, acknowledge — or prefer. The truth, however, is that we must actively help each other float, in order to avoid all sinking together.

So, we have a lot going for us as we embark upon the work of this conference. We have choices. We have power. And, we have potential allies. Armed with these sources of reassurance and strength, I hope we will make tremendous progress together — both during and beyond this conference.

What will we do as a result of this conference to help rural communities survive and thrive? That remains my main question for you and my abiding challenge to you. In the end, of course, we will still be imperfect people in an imperfect world. Nevertheless, if we remember that what we can make real choices that do matter, if we remember the extent of our collective power, and if we remember that we have the chance to travel our path with valuable partners and allies alongside us, then there is reason to be optimistic. And, there is good reason to think we can become much less imperfect people who have contributed to making this a notably less imperfect world.

In conclusion I would like to share with you a favourite story. It first was told years ago by a rural civil rights leader in the United States named Fannie Lou Hamer:

> *There was a very wise old man, and he could answer questions that seemed almost impossible to answer. Well, some young people were going to see him one day. On the way there, they said to each other, "We're going to trick this old man today. We're going to catch a bird, and we're going to carry it to this old man. And, we're going to ask him, 'This that we hold in our hands today, is it alive or is it dead?' If he says, 'Dead,' we're going to turn it loose and let it fly away. But if he says, 'Alive,' we're going to crush it." So, they caught a bird, walked up to the old man and said, "This that we hold in our hands today, is it alive or is it dead?" He looked at the young people and he smiled. And then he said, "It's in your hands."*

That is the message I would like to leave with you. Rural development is not somebody else's concern — nor does the answer to the open question about whether rural communities will survive and thrive in the years ahead rest solely with either the elites or the "ordinary" people. What we do — while we're here together and after we go back home — really matters. Indeed, to a very large extent, the future of rural communities, of rural society, and of rural life is in our collective hands.